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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000489

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TAGS: PREL MARR PGOV ASEC CASC FJ

SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 11/13: GCC TRIES TO MEDIATE; NO STABLE OUTCOME IN SIGHT

REF: A. SUVA 486

1B. DINGER-EAP/ANP E-MAIL OF NOV. 10

1C. SUVA 460

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

11. (C) Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama appeared before the Great Council of Chiefs on Nov. 10 and angrily attacked PM Qarase and his policies. Thereafter, the GCC tilted toward Qarase and initiated an effort to mediate. It is possible an attempt will be made to resuscitate a dialogue among Bainimarama, Qarase, and Vice President Madraiwiwi; however, no easy way out is apparent. Meanwhile, the Fiji Police reportedly expect sedition charges against Bainimarama shortly, followed by the President issuing a successful suspension order. In comment, we note that Fiji is in an uneasy calm, with no confidence that a politically-stable solution is in sight. As if all that isn't enough, Fiji's multi-party Cabinet is under threat, with the national budget bill a major hurdle. And former PM Rabuka is on trial for attempting to incite mutiny against Bainimarama in 2000. End summary.

Bainimarama vents before GCC

12. (C) Per ref A, Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) met on Thursday, Nov. 10, at the request of PM Qarase in an attempt to contribute to a solution of Fiji's civil-military crisis. RFMF Commander Bainimarama declined to attend. However, as noted ref B, when a delegation from the GCC visited Bainimarama that evening he agreed to participate in a continuation of the meeting on Friday, on the condition that the GCC would commit not to involve itself in the crisis, other than to listen to both sides. Bainimarama and about ten of his senior officers attended the Friday session. Bainimarama spent about an hour conveying his views and responding to questions. He reportedly called Qarase a liar to his face and decried "racist" policies of the Government.

GCC tilts to Qarase; will attempt to mediate

13. (C) After the RFMF officers left, the GCC agreed to a series of resolutions, contrary to the supposed commitment to Bainimarama, though we gather he was not surprised. The Chiefs set up a four-person committee, chaired by GCC Chairman Bokini, to find ways to mediate the crisis. That committee is to report back at the next GCC meeting in mid-December. The GCC also affirmed their belief in rule of law, democracy, customary laws, the right of Parliament to legislate, etc. They said all citizens must "respect, abide and protect" such rights at all times. While there was no explicit mention of three controversial bills, the language

on parliamentary legislating could be read to endorse having the bills receive consideration. All in all, the GCC clearly tilted toward Qarase.

As Bainimarama attacks Qarase; a hint of dialogue?

¶4. (U) Late on Nov. 10, Bainimarama informed the media that, since the PM has "given up" on the Army, the Army has also "given up" on the PM. In other statements, Bainimarama reportedly said he has "washed his hands" of the PM and warned that the PM is "living on borrowed time." On the other hand, he also reportedly committed to the GCC that the Army will allow the Government time to resolve the crisis. An aspect of that could be a resumption of a dialogue among Vice President Madraiwiwi, Bainimarama, and Qarase that began last February during an earlier phase of the crisis but that stumbled after only a couple of meetings when Bainimarama stopped meeting with Qarase, claiming their discussions were going nowhere. On Nov. 11, during the opening of a women's crisis center in Suva, the VP noted to us that maybe he should repaint his office to match the center's soothing soft-green walls, suggesting: "It might help calm the Commander."

Demands and counters

¶5. (C) On Wednesday, Nov. 8, prior to the GCC meeting, Bainimarama had sent Qarase a list of issues that the Army insisted must be resolved. The list, in reality demands, reportedly included: to withdraw the controversial bills; to remove Police Commissioner Hughes; and to scrap investigations against the military, including allegations of murdering mutinous soldiers in 2000 and more recent allegations of subversion. Qarase said publicly that he

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immediately wrote back reiterating his willingness to enter into discussions. On Thursday, Qarase told the GCC two of the controversial bills that have already been introduced "would not be withdrawn." He did note that they can be revised via parliamentary means, as reportedly is happening with the reconciliation (RTUB) bill. Qarase's refusal to just scrap the bills reportedly contributed to Bainimarama's angry display before the GCC.

Manueli sees no easy way out

¶6. (C) Former Commander, RFMF, and former Minister for Home Affairs, Paul Manueli, who remains a senior advisor to Bainimarama and others in the Army, stopped by on Nov. 13. He suggested that personal animosities between Qarase and Bainimarama are intense, with fault on both sides, and it is difficult to see a way out. He said the Commodore has been receiving some "awful advice" from behind the scenes, as has Qarase. Manueli claimed that on Oct. 31, when the President sought to suspend Bainimarama, senior RFMF officers were on the verge of acting against the Government. On seeing that, Manueli rushed to VP Madraiwiwi and argued successfully for the President to inactivate the suspension order. Asked the current mood of the RFMF senior leadership regarding a coup, Manueli expressed uncertainty. When we stressed the importance of protecting the democratic system, Manueli agreed. When we noted that Bainimarama and his senior officers now seem to acknowledge no power above themselves, Manueli offered no response.

A new plan to force Bainimarama out?

¶7. (C) A senior police contact has informed the Embassy that police investigations of the RFMF sedition charges are complete and have gone to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP). The aim is a very rapid response, this week or next. With a green light, the police will seek a court summons that would lead to a court date, probably in December. With the court summons, the police expect the President would attempt again to suspend Bainimarama, pending court action. With

that, BrigGen Iowane Naivalurua, who just returned from heading Fiji's contingent to UNAMI in Iraq, would be named Acting Commander; and the police believe Naivalurua has the clout to win over nearly all the RFMF. The police contact said, except for a few RFMF officers at the top, the military and police still have good relations. The police feel pressure to act against the RFMF senior leaders, since "they have broken the law."

Multi-party cabinet under threat

¶8. (U) In other news, Fiji's multi-party Cabinet experiment may be severely tested shortly. The Fiji Labor Party (FLP) held a meeting on Nov. 9, with some, but not all, of FLP's nine Cabinet members attending. FLP leader Chaudhry announced afterward that the party unanimously agreed to oppose the Qarase budget because the proposal is "anti-poor."

Chaudhry claimed Qarase did not consult on tax aspects, including a 20% increase in VAT (from 12.5% to 15%). Qarase and Chaudhry have had inconclusive discussions on guidelines for the multi-party Cabinet, but Qarase clearly expects all Cabinet members to vote on the floor of Parliament in favor of any legislation Cabinet previously approved. FLP cabinet members may have to choose: vote with Cabinet (thereby facing FLP censure) or vote with FLP (thereby facing loss of Cabinet portfolio).

Former PM Rabuka in the dock

¶9. (U) A criminal trial of former PM Rabuka commenced on Nov.

¶10. He is charged with inciting RFMF officers in July and November 2000 to mutiny against Bainimarama. Former RFMF LtCol. Seravakula (now with the UN in Afghanistan) is the first witness. He has testified he received phone calls from Rabuka urging mutiny but declined to act.

Comment

¶10. (C) Fiji has settled into an uneasy calm, without a sense that a coup is imminent but without confidence that a peaceful, stability-creating solution is on the horizon. The police scenario in para 7 sounds a lot like the Government scenario for Oct. 31 (Ref C), with the exceptions that Bainimarama and BG Naivalurua both are now in Fiji. There is no doubt Naivalurua is highly respected. There must be doubt, given the RFMF's rebuff of the President just two weeks ago, whether a new effort to suspend Bainimarama will succeed.

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